Part of the Family
Romans 8:12-17
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WBAA

There is nothing quite so touching as an orphan. No picture tugs at our hearts quite so urgently as the picture of a poor, orphaned waif. There are few people so hardened by life as to resist the very human urge to cradle a homeless child. This universal human response occurs because every man who ever lived knows that there is no pain quite like the pain of homesickness; and no human agony quite like the sense of separation from loved ones and loving relationships.

Each of us could document the time when homesickness first struck us: the pain is real enough to be remembered ~~still~~ over the years. Perhaps it was simply an overnight stay with relatives; perhaps it was an extended period of separation from our parents. In many cases it occured as a result of adversity; something happened to us and we suddenly found ourselves cut off from those relationships that provide support and secruity. I can recall, for instance, getting into a scuffle at summer camp, at the age of twelve; and not only losing the fight but also bearing the wrath of the counselor. And then lying in my bunk, totally alone, totally cut off from the laps into which I would gladly have crawled; surely the most forlorn and miserable little boy in all of God's creation.

I can recall, several years later, standing in a college parking lot on a September afternoon, choking back tears which young men don't dare shed in public, as the green Dodge bearing my father, mother and brother, turned the corner.

And still, for all of us, there are symptoms of that universal malady: no longer a desire to return to that physical place that used to be "home"; but a very deep and personal melancholy that emerges on occasion: a very personal grief for the home that is no more and the relationships that exist only in the recesses of memory. We know what it is to be homesick.

An article in the paper last week told how it is for servicemen in Vietnam - who begin counting days the moment they arrive: and for whom "home" is a growing obsession. In the play and movie, Oliver sings "Where is Love", and we know intuitively why he's singing: we feel his deep pain.

One of the most vivid images of homesickness I have ever ~~discovered~~ read, ~~however, is in the 137th Psalm, part of which we read responsively this morning.~~ is in the 137th The scene is Babylon: the people of Israel have been carried away from their land and are in exile: they are separated from home - perhaps for good. Listen again to their lament:

"By the rivers of Babylon
we sat and cried when we
remember Zion.
On the willows nearby
we hung our harps.
Those who captured us told us to sing;
they told us to entertain them:
'Sing us a song about Zion!'
How can we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?
May I never be able to play the harp again,
if I forget you, Jerusalem!
May I never be able to sing again,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not think of you as my
greatest joy!'" [Modern Man in Today's English Version]

That is homesickness: that is a kind of pain and despair I can feel. Anyone who has ever been separated from home and loved ones knows exactly what the writer of that Psalm was talking about.

One of the deepest needs of man is the need of a home: a place where he

belongs, but more than a place, really. An environment in which the sense of belongingness is present; relationships with others that are supportive and loving and which, therefore, bring a sense of security. It is a need which, increasingly, is not met in the framework of our culture and life-style. ~~The changing constituency of this congregation is immediate evidence of the tremendous mobility of the American people.~~ And in trying to adapt to the reality of a move every two years or so, people learn to live with a kind of permanent restlessness and rootlessness. It even becomes difficult to establish friendships because everyone knows it won't be for long. Sociologists and psychologists are telling us that our mobility and its results are fast becoming a social problem of major proportions. Without a permanent place - a home - the family itself becomes overloaded with responsibility. Husband, wife and children look to each other for supportive relationships once provided by the larger family and circle of friends. And many times the nuclear family cannot stand up under the load. There is in the mobile part of our population a deep need to settle down; often expressed, in pain and anxiety, by a wife who delivers the ultimatum: "This is the last move. I don't care where - but we must settle down and create our home."

That's a human problem that we are capable of dealing with when we see it happen. I continue to feel that it is in this area that the church, as a congregation of people, can be of service to real human need. We are able, here, to short-circuit the ordinary processes by which people find friends, and a sense of belonging in a community. We are able to minister to the deepest needs of each other by being open to the stranger: by simple friendliness: by going out of our way to let the new resident know that he matters - and that therefore he is "at home".

There is, however, a deeper significance to all of this. There is a sense in which the common human experience of homesickness exists in all of us on a level we might call "theological" or "spiritual". The restlessness

of the human spirit: the search for meaning: the periodic despair when all of us ask "What's it all about?" , might be called a form of universal homesickness. One way of defining the dilemma of man is in terms of separation from our true home - ~~our true self~~ - or our true father.

That's why Paul chose the image of "Sonship" to describe what happens to a man in Jesus Christ. In the New Testament Lesson this morning, taken from Paul's letter to the Romans, he is trying to set out the particularities of the Christian life; the uniqueness of being grasped by the good news. It is, says Paul, like becoming God's own son: that is the unique and new state of being into which a Christian is brought by God's grace. He's now part of God's own family.

Paul would have agreed that all men are children of God, ~~simply as a result of their creation.~~ The race is, in fact, one big family. But in the "fall", Paul saw the dissolving of the original family ties. Men pull out - men try to go it alone with disastrous results. And so God has adopted us back. The word translated "Spirit of Sonship" could well have been translated "adoption", and there appears to be little doubt that in writing to the Romans Paul was using the particular Roman practice of adoption as a model. Therein lies a long but interesting story.

Under Roman law, adoption was a serious and difficult procedure: but it could be implemented while a child's true father was still living. Under the law, a father's power over his son was absolute: a son never "came of age" in terms of moving out from under the control of the father. Adoption was accomplished by a public ritual, witnessed by seven other men, in which the real father put his son up for sale three times, and bought him back twice. The third time he did not buy him back, thus severing his own power. The adopting father then brought his own case to a magistrate who consumated the adoption. It was a very serious step to take.

Under the law, the adopted son became a full heir to his new father's

possessions: if he had old debts they were canceled: he literally became a new person.

[This information from William Barclay, The Letter to the Romans, p. 110 - 111, Daily Study Bible]

Paul has all of that in mind when he talks about our becoming the Sons of God. In Jesus Christ God has gone through the expense and difficulty of adopting us. But in our case, it is not a new father and a new home, but a joyful reunion with the home and father we left behind long ago. We are part of the family once again.

We are compelled to ask at this point, if we have not, infact, merely indulged in an exercise of sentimentality. One of the unspoken criticisms of Christian Faith is that it is for the weak, the soft, the sentimental: that the true man or woman, will learn to overcome such things as the felt need for a home, or for love, or for deep, redeeming relationships. Why, after all, do we need a home - or a father - or any kind of permanent relationships? Why can't we just muster a little back bone, and go it alone?

Well, we can, and some of us do, and many of us harbor feelings that we are something less than strong individuals when we experience this particular need. The question, then, is, "should we?" Is that the way life was intended to be?"

John Knox, professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary, [Life in Christ Jesus] tells the story of a young lad, separated from his parents, who wrote a very lonely and sad letter to them in which he began, for the first time, to ask the fundamental human question. "Why am I alive? I feel as if I have no purpose in life at all?" Knox comments: "His question, never again to be altogether silenced in his heart, is the human question: and no philosopher could have asked it more truly and wisely . . . It belongs to our nature as men to be capable of asking this question, and at the same time to be incapable of answering it. We are so made as to need to know what, as

men, we cannot know." [p. 95]

The boy asked the question because he was separated from his parents. So, soon or late, we all ask it. "What is the meaning of my life?" We can protect ourselves from it: we can avoid it with relentless activity and social involvements, but we cannot escape it. It is our nature to contemplate our own death and to ask "What does my life mean?"

The anxiety of the boy was not so much that he found himself asking the question but apart from the supportive love of his parents, apart from the environment in which he knew even this ultimate, unanswerable question could be asked in the context of undying love.

Knox deduces from this - rightly, I believe - that our basic malady is not ignorance but homesickness. We don't need an answer to that question, nearly so much as a relationship with One we can trust to have the answer.

That need is expressed in a little ritual often played out between parents and children. Sooner or later children become aware of death, and ask some pretty trying questions; such as: "When will I die?" and more often than not I think what is happening here is not so much an academic inquiry as a plea for love and security. What is expressed here is not so much the need for information, as the need for affirmation: affirmation that love is firm: that the child may be secure: that there is a strong relationship he can lean on and into which he can throw every fear, every care, in the assurance that the parent loves and will continue loving. Next time it happens, don't give an academic answer. Give a hug, and see if it isn't sufficient.

The Good News of the Gospel which comes to each of us, personally, where we live, is that we are part of the family; that God has adopted us as his own children: that in Jesus Christ he has brought us into a saving relationship with himself: that it has been witnessed: that it is accomplished. There is no need to be homesick ever again. There is no need to feel alone, separate, cut off, lost.

Jesus, himself, told it that way in the story of the Prodigal son. God is like that father - waiting, watching, running down the road to welcome us home. When that happens there is celebration. In Oliver, when the little boy is welcomed into the family of thieves thereis dancing and singing and great, uninhibited joy. That's what Christian worship Faith ought to be. That's what the essential life of the Church of Jesus Christ Christian is all about - a great celebration of reunion.

Again, John Knox, has put it beautifully: "We may, or may not, find the answers to our questions. But may we not fail to be found of him, who is himself the answer to more than our questions - the answer to our deepest need as persons! For to be found of him is breath, and bread, and drink, and health, and home." [p. 98]

Amen.

Our father, you have made us restless until we find our rest in you. In seeking - may we be found: in asking those difficult questions, may we be open to you - the answer to all our needs. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.